Perceptions of the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability in the United States

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Perceptions of the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability in the United States

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Abstract

Background: The United States has yet to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The extent of public support in the United States for the rights of persons with intellectual disability is not known.

Methods: Online public opinion polls were conducted nationally and in eight selected cities in 2017 and repeated in 2018 with 26,876 respondents in total.

Results: Support for rights was high: notably in accessing healthcare, schooling, playing sports and getting married. However, less support was evident for the rights of people who were perceived as less capable. Respondents with prior frequent personal contact and who had an engagement with Special Olympics were those most likely to support the rights and capabilities of persons with intellectual disability.

Conclusions: Public support for the ratification of the UN Convention seems likely. Further longitudinal research could identify successful strategies for implementing the rights of disabled persons locally and nationally.

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Background

The United States is one of very few countries that have yet to ratify the United Nations Convention of the Right of Persons with Disabilities (2006) despite being one of the early signatories to the Convention. Kanter (2019) contends that the main reason for ratification is to help to fully realize the promise of the American with Disabilities Act and its 2008 amendments: arguing that people with disabilities still face discrimination on matters that affect their quality of life, such as education, employment, health and housing.

Debates about the legal underpinnings of rights are especially pertinent to persons with intellectual disabilities as the focus increasingly is on their social inclusion and participation in society (Hewitt & Nye-Lengerman, 2019). Hästbacka et al. (2016) undertook a scoping review of European studies which identified that societal attitudes and support from people in close contact with people with disabilities were the main facilitators of social participation.

A three-tier, ecological framework by Fisher and Purcal (2017) described the impact of public attitudes in the personal domain, which in turn influences, and is influenced by, organizational domains such as the provision of health, education and social services and especially the attitudes of professionals working within these organizational systems. The third domain identified is government, where legislation and policy is formulated and implemented. But in democratic societies at least, changes at this level may follow on from changes in public attitudes in the personal and/or organizational domains rather than from governmental actions. For example, Cook et al. (2014) argue that laws permitting same-sex marriage in the United States followed on from more positive attitudes to homosexuality among the general public from 1988 onwards, which Baunach (2012) described as a culture shift within US society.

To date few studies that explored the general public's perceptions of the rights of people with intellectual disability. No studies were found for the United States but in Ireland, McConkey (2019) reported that the Irish public are more sympathetic to the rights of persons with physical and sensorial disabilities than to those with cognitive or emotional impairments. Similarly in Israel, there was less support for the rights of persons with intellectual disability compared to persons with physical disabilities although respondents who were more socially distanced from people with disabilities in general, had a lower perception of rights (Werner, 2015). These findings may reflect concerns about the capability of people with intellectual disabilities to appreciate and to exercise their rights. Indeed, old definitions of intellectual disability referred to an inability to safeguard themselves against common dangers while modern definitions continue to stress limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviours (AAIDD, 2010). Also, service provision in the United States, as in most other countries, was dominated in the past century by institutional care and only in recent decades have personalized, community supports started to evolve (Conrad, 2020).

It was against this background that the present study was conceived. Special Olympics noted in its current Global Strategic Plan that "attitude change must be a deliberate outcome of Special Olympics" and highlighted the role of public attitudes in promoting inclusion in friendships, communities, health, education and jobs. In order to obtain a baseline of current attitudes in the United States, online opinion polls were commissioned from a leading market research organization. As well as a nationally representative survey, eight cities across the United States were also polled using representative samples of their adult population in terms of age and gender. One year later the surveys were repeated in order to assess the robustness of the findings.

The three main research objectives of this study were as follows:

- To describe public perceptions in the United States of the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities and the relationship between rights and capabilities.
- To identify predictors associated with greater support for the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability: including demographic characteristics and prior contact. Past attitudinal research has identified relationships between more positive attitudes to people with intellectual disability and prior contact, age and educational level, with gender having a variable relationship (Scior, 2011). Other possible predictors were assessed including ethnicity and family income as previous studies had identified relationships with more negative attitudes (Scior et al., 2013). Also awareness of, and engagement with Special Olympics was added as a further predictor as this was of particular interest to the commissioners of the study.
- To examine consistency in responses across the United States for data collected over two waves of the study. Most opinion polls have a recognized margin of error of around ± 3% although this is a somewhat simplistic approach and is hard to defend (Mouncey, 2018). However, a more thorough test would be to examine the findings with a second comparable sample using the same methods and also to compare the findings from across selected samples within a country as well as nationally. To our knowledge, this has rarely been done in the context of opinion polling of public attitudes to disability.

The study formed part of a wider international study that is reported elsewhere (Slater et al. 2020). The US data was unique in two respects. Information was available on ethnicity and household income, and the surveys were repeated one year later.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Questionnaire development

Special Olympics Inc. (SOI) partnered with Kantar Millward Brown, a major market research company operating globally with around 5.5 million online research respondents across 45 countries. Online, self-completion surveys were chosen as the most efficient way of obtaining information from representative samples by age and gender across different cities and states in the United States. In a US study of race and social inequalities, the differences between information gathered from online and from face-to-face interviews found substantial similarities across the two survey modalities especially when the focus was on examining relationships between variables and testing theories, rather than attempting to make precise population estimates (Simmons & Bobo, 2015). Moreover, online surveys are thought to reduce the risk of socially desirable responding compared to personal interviews (Krumpal, 2013).

Special Olympics personnel developed the questionnaire which covered attitudes to the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability in collaboration with an Advisory Panel of international researchers. Items were gleaned and adapted from previous research (e.g. Morin et al., 2013; Scior, 2011) and prioritized as there was a limit to the number of questions to be asked in the online surveys with a completion time of 15 min. The questionnaire was cognitively tested by Kantar and checked by Special Olympics personnel in State programs for accuracy of meaning. The US surveys were available only in English.

At the outset of the survey, respondents were provided with this explanation:

> Intellectual disability (or ID) is a term used when a person has certain limitations in intellectual functioning and skills, including communication, social and self-care skills. These limitations can cause a child to develop and learn more slowly or differently than a typically developing child. Intellectual disability can happen any time before a child turns 18 years old, even before birth. People with certain conditions like Down Syndrome, Fragile-X, and others will have intellectual disabilities. Dyslexia and mental illness are not intellectual disabilities.

TABLE 1 The characteristics of respondents across the 18 surveys in the United States (n = 26,876)

	Number	Valid %
Gender		
Male	13,211	49.2
Female	13,664	50.8
Age Bands		
18–34 years	6,847	25.5
35–54 years	9,702	36.1
55+ years	10,327	38.4
University educated		
Yes	16,853	62.7
No	10,023	37.3
Marital status		
Married/partner	15,849	59.9
Single/widowed/divorced	10,619	40.1
Missing	417	
Parent of child or teenagers		
Yes	6,290	23.4
No	20,586	76.6
Employed in related field		
Yes	4,970	18.5
No	21,906	81.5
Declared Disability		
Yes	3,480	12.9
No	23.396	87.1
Ethnicity		
White American	20,685	77.9
Non-White American	5,588	22.1
Missing	1,589	
Income		
Less than $60,000	11,343	46.5
$60,000 and over	13,031	53.5
Missing	2,667	
Prior contact with people with intellectual disability		
Frequent personal contact	8,134	31.2
Infrequent personal contact	9,061	34.8
No personal contact	8,871	34.0
Missing	810	
Involved in volunteering		
Yes	13,432	50.0
No	13,444	50.0
Involvement in sports		
Yes	10,432	38.4
No	16,559	61.6
Engagement with Special Olympics		
Engaged	15,293	56.9
Not engaged	10,583	43.1

Respondents were then asked to rate a series of questions relating to the rights of people with intellectual disability which drew on key articles from the UNCRPD (see Table 2). A complementary set of 10 questions was also asked about whether they felt that people with intellectual disability were capable of exercising these rights (see Table 3). The items were presented to all respondents in the same order.

In alignment with previous studies, a seven-point rating scale was provided to respondents to rate the items from "entirely disagree … to neither disagree/agree … to entirely agree."

Certain demographic information was also requested from respondents towards the end of the survey (see Table 1). These details would aid the profiling of persons who were more likely to support the rights and capabilities of persons with intellectual disability, such as whether they had personal contact with someone who had intellectual disability, were employed in health, social care or education settings, or if they were involved in volunteering activities or playing sports which could be considered proxies for their social engagement. Engagement with Special Olympics was defined as a personal or family involvement in sporting activities or seeing Special Olympics on television (see McConkey et al., 2019 for further details).

2.2 | Sample selection and research design

In addition to a US national sample, Special Olympics selected eight cities from across the United States in which additional samples would be recruited. The locations chosen were ones in which Special Olympics had a particular interest because of the activities and programs underway or planned for them. The eight cities were as follows: Boston, Chicago, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington DC.

The nine surveys were repeated one year later with new samples of respondents. The intention had been to recruit the original respondents but this did not prove feasible. It is possible that some participants in the second wave of surveys had responded previously although they could be not identified as responses were anonymous.

2.3 | Procedure

Kantar, or their associates in certain locations, were responsible for the recruitment of participants, the presentation of the questions online and recording responses. For each survey, repeated waves of invitations by email were sent out to existing panel members until approximately 1,500 respondents were attained. The resulting samples were balanced by national and city gender ratios and age profile.

Panel members were given a general indication about the content of the questionnaire when invited to participate in the survey but they first had to confirm their gender, age and provide a Zip Code (or equivalent). Overall 7% of initial respondents dropped out at this point with a further 5% failing to complete the survey having

TABLE 2 The percentage of entirely agree responses to Rights Items in waves 1 and 2 and the factor loadings on the factor analysis (*Note*: The items were re-arranged in terms of percentages)

People with intellectual disability should have the right to…	Factor Loadings	Wave 1 Number % *N* = 13,495	Wave 2 Number (%) *N* = 13,321	Waves 1 &2 Number (%) *N* = 26,876
Access healthcare	0.815	10,278	9,973	20,251
		76.2%	74.5%	75.3%
Attend school	0.848	9,822	9,610	19,432
		72.8%	71.8%	72.3%
Get married	0.845	7,985	7,562	15,547
		59.2%	56.5%	57.8%
Play sports on school or community teams	0.861	7,927	7,530	15,457
		58.7%	56.3%	57.5%
Choose where they live	0.852	7,059	6,734	13,793
		52.3%	50.3%	51.3%
Vote in elections	0.493	5,059	6,379	11,438
		37.5%	47.7%	42.6%
Raise children	0.745	5,062	4,838	9,900
		37.5%	36.2%	36.8%

commenced it. (A breakdown of their characteristics was not available). In particular, there was no mention of Special Olympics until the end of the questionnaire when respondents were asked about their awareness of, and engagement with the organization.

The respondents had to record a response to each item before they could move on to the next question. Hence, there were no missing data on the main variables included in the questionnaire although a small proportion of respondents chose not to disclose certain personal details, particularly ethnicity and income.

2.4 | Ethical approval

In line with standard market research practice, formal ethical approval was not sought for the surveys. However, Kantar and their associates fully subscribed to the industry's code of practice. All responses were anonymous so no-one could be identified through their participation. Respondents could freely chose to take part and to drop-out without having to give a reason. The only incentive provided was the award of points to Kantar panel members for taking part in a survey. They were not given any type of extra or direct incentive which would make this survey any more "appealing" than any other survey.

2.5 | Data analysis

Kantar and their associates undertook the data cleaning and anonymized the complete data set which was made available to the authors who undertook the statistical analyses using SPSS (vers 25). Descriptive statistics were first calculated for each individual item relating to Rights and Capabilities, and comparisons were made for data in the two waves. A principal components analysis of all the items relating to rights and capabilities identified two distinct factors reflective of each topic. Separate principal components analyses were then conducted for the two sets of items which identified one principal factor in each. A summary score was then calculated across the two sets of items. Bivariate analyses using Independent *t* tests were undertaken to identify the significance of relationships between the summary scores for rights and capabilities with possible predictor variables. The significant variables were then entered into a step-wise, linear regression analysis to identify the characteristics of respondents who were more supportive of rights and who had rated people with intellectual disability as more capable. However, the sample size for these analyses was reduced slightly as noted below because of the small numbers of respondents who did not disclose their ethnicity and/or income. The regression analyses took account of the two waves and the nine locations of the survey in order to control for cluster effects.

2.6 | Participants

In all, 26,876 participants took part in the study with 13,495 in Wace 1 and 13,321 in Wave 2. As the demographic differences across the two waves were marginal, Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants across the total sample of respondents in both waves.

The samples matched the gender and age profile of the relevant US general population but this is not necessarily the case for the other demographic indicators. The higher level of university-educated respondents may result from the online methodology chosen as previous studies have noted (Simmons & Bobo, 2015).

Additional information was gathered on variables that could be predictive of public attitudes in line with past research, such as previous contacts with persons who had intellectual disability. Three groupings were formed: Frequent (daily or weekly) personal meetings: Infrequent (monthly or less often) personal meetings and no personal contacts. In addition, details were obtained of persons who may have a greater likelihood of meeting persons with intellectual disability, such as whether they were employed in health, social care or education settings, if they were involved in any form of volunteering activities or in playing sports.

Information was also obtained on their engagement with Special Olympics which included those who had a personal or family involvement in their sporting activities, if they had attended a SO event or who had watched Special Olympics on TV, read about it or donated to it. The latter grouping made up around two-thirds of those classed as engaged with SO. (see McConkey et al. 2019 for further details).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Perceptions of rights

Table 2 gives the number and percentage of respondents selecting "entirely agree" to the seven items relating to rights. The percentages were calculated for each wave and across the two waves. The differences in the percentages of entirely agree response between the two waves were usually within the conventional ±3%; although this was not so for the items on the right to vote in elections.

On all the items, the responses were skewed towards agreement with many fewer "disagree" responses. Agreements were strongest for the right to access healthcare and attend school and less for voting in elections and raising children. However, on the latter two items, the proportion choosing any of the three "agree" ratings outweighed those who disagreed or were unsure (76% and 72%, respectively). Thus, the majority of respondents expressed agreement with all of the rights listed in both waves of the study.

The ratings given to the seven items across both waves were entered into a principal components analysis which identified one factor that accounted for 62% of the variance (see Table 2 for the factor loadings of items). The Cronbach alpha for the seven items was 0.884.

A summary score was then computed across the seven items by counting the number of items that each person had rated as entirely agree), giving a range of total scores from 0 to 7. Higher scores were indicative of greater support the rights of people with intellectual disability. Overall the mean score was 3.93 (standard deviation: 2.52) and median of 4.0 with a skewness of −0.309. The difference in the mean scores at Wave 1:3.94 (*SD*: 2.36) and Wave 2:3.93 (*SD*: 2.67) was not statically significant ($t = 0.777$: $p > .01$).

3.2 | Perceptions of capabilities

Table 3 gives the number and percentage of respondents selecting "entirely agree" to the ten items relating to the capabilities of people with intellectual disability. As before, the percentages were calculated for each wave and across the two waves. The differences in the percentages of entirely agree response between the two waves were usually within 2%.

The majority of respondents "entirely agreed" that people with intellectual disability were capable of being friends with people who did not have an intellectual disability; having a paid or unpaid job and graduating from high or secondary school whereas agreements were least for managing a business. Nonetheless, even on the latter item, 60% of respondents selected an agreement rating.

The 10 capability items were entered into a principal components analysis which identified one factor which accounted for 63% of the variance (see Table 3 for the factor loadings of the items). The Cronbach alpha for the 10 items was 0.932.

A summary score was then computed across the 10 items by counting the number of items that each person had rated as entirely agree), giving a range of total scores from 0 to 10. Higher scores indicated greater support for the capabilities of people with intellectual disability. Overall the mean score was 3.89 (*SD*: 3.53) and median of 3.0 with a skewness of 0.477. However, the difference in the mean scores at Wave 1:3.97 (*SD*: 3.51) and Wave 2:3.82 (*SD*: 3.54) although marginal was statically significant ($t = 3.54$: $p < .001$).

3.3 | Relationship between ratings of rights and capabilities

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation between the summary score for Rights and for Capabilities was 0.692 ($p < .001$). When two subgroupings were created for each measure by dividing respondents whose scores were above and below the median, four groupings emerged. In all 42.1% of respondents across both waves indicated greater support for the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability while 36.0% had indicated less support on both rights and capabilities. Interestingly, 16.9% indicated greater support for rights compared to capabilities with 5.1% rated Capabilities higher than Rights (Chi Sq 9,079.4: $p < .001$).

3.4 | Regression analyses

Linear regression analyses were undertaken to identify the variables that predicted higher support for rights and for capabilities. Due to the high correlation between ratings for Rights and for Capabilities, separate regression analyses were undertaken to identify the variables that were related to higher agreement with each set of items. These analyses would identify the predictors that are either unique to, or common across both sets of ratings.

Independent *t* tests were used to examine the significance of the relationships between the various predictor variables and the summary score for rights and capability items (see Table 1). All those that were significant ($p < .01$) were entered into a step-wise linear regression analysis to identify those that were significantly related to

TABLE 3 The number and percentage of 'entirely agree' responses in waves 1 and 2 to the items relating to the capabilities of people with intellectual disability and the factor loadings (*Note*: The items were re-arranged in terms of percentages)

People with intellectual disabilities are capable of…	Factor loading	Wave 1 Number % *N* = 13,495	Wave 2 Number (%) *N* = 13,321	Waves 1 &2 Number (%) *N* = 26,876
Being friends with people without intellectual disabilities	0.714	8,742	8,318	17,060
		64.8%	62.2%	63.5%
Having a job (paid or unpaid)	0.776	7,817	7,508	15,325
		57.9%	56.1%	57.0%
Graduating from high school/ secondary school	0.810	7,368	7,017	14,385
		54.6%	52.4%	53.5%
Voting in elections	0.807	5,280	5,287	10,567
		39.1%	39.5%	39.3%
Playing sports on a team with people without intellectual disabilities	0.757	4,844	4,561	9,405
		35.9%	34.1%	35.0%
Describing health symptoms to a doctor	0.794	4,542	4,325	8,867
		33.7%	32.3%	33.0%
Making their own decisions	0.839	4,075	3,881	7,956
		30.2%	29.0%	29.6%
Being a community leader	0.812	4,107	3,783	7,890
		30.4%	28.3%	29.4%
Raising children	0.803	3,749	3,539	7,288
		27.8%	26.4%	27.1%
Managing a business	0.787	3,028	2,840	5,868
		22.4%	21.2%	21.8%

TABLE 4 Regression analysis summary for variables predicting rights scores

	Beta	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Standarised Coefficients	*t*	Sig.
(Constant)	5.714	5.470	5.958		45.902	0.000
Prior Contact	−0.287	−0.326	−0.247	−0.092	−14.194	0.000
Engagement with Special Olympics	−0.461	−0.525	−0.396	−0.091	−14.038	0.000
Gender	0.443	0.381	0.505	0.089	13.994	0.000
US Ethnic Group	−0.402	−0.478	−0.326	−0.066	−10.400	0.000
University educated	−0.161	−0.225	−0.096	−0.031	−4.892	0.000
Age groups	−0.090	−0.129	−0.050	−0.028	−4.411	0.000
Employed in related field	−0.157	−0.237	−0.077	−0.025	−3.835	0.000

higher scores on rights and capability. These analyses also controlled for the inter-relationships among the predictor variables as well as for the two waves of data gathering and nine locations in which the surveys were undertaken. However, the latter two variables did not add significantly to the regressions.

Table 4 presents the resulting model for Rights and although statistically significant, it accounted for only a small proportion of the variance as indicated the R square ($F = 137.76$; *df* 7:24,525: $p < .001$: $R^2 = 0.038$).

In Table 4, the predictors are listed in the step order identified in the regression. People with frequent personal contact "entirely agreed" with more Rights than those with no personal contact, followed by those who also engaged with Special Olympics. Females were more supported of rights than males as were White Americans compared to all other ethnic groups. University-educated respondents; those under 55 years of age and persons employed in health, social services and education also contributed significantly to the regression.

Table 5 presents the regression model for scores on the Capability items. This model also only accounted for a small proportion of the variance albeit it was statistically significant (($F = 130.76$; *df* 7:24,525: $p < .001$: $R^2 = 0.036$).

The respondents with higher capability scores were those who had frequent personal contact with people with intellectual disability, who were engaged with Special Olympics and were female. People aged under 55 years, who were white American, who worked in health, social services or education and who were involved in volunteering also scored higher on capabilities. These are broadly comparable to the regression model for rights.

4 | DISCUSSION

This is the largest study of public attitudes towards intellectual disability to be undertaken in the United States. As well as including a national sample, surveys were carried out in eight selected cities across the country to determine whether there were any regional differences and none were found. Moreover, the original study was replicated one year later to test the reliability of the findings, and they were replicated across the two waves.

In 2017–2018, the US public were very supportive of the rights of people with intellectual disabilities, notably in terms of their access to healthcare and to schooling. Although they were less supportive of the right to raise children or to vote in elections, a majority choose any of the three "agree" ratings on these rights. Hence by 2018, the American public seemed supportive of the rights of persons with intellectual disabilities, at least in terms of the cross-section of rights from the UN Convention that were tested in this study. Thus, the findings can be used by advocacy groups and organisations in the US lobbying for ratification of the UNCRPD by the Federal Government.

The public's perceptions of rights were closely associated with their perceptions of the capabilities of people to exercise their rights. In general, people with intellectual disability were seen as being more capable of having friends, holding down a job and graduating from high school than they were in relation to other tasks such as managing a business. Indeed the relatively high capability scores are somewhat surprising as most of these are tasks that generally only a minority of people with intellectual disability would have had the opportunity to show their capabilities. Moreover, respondents were reminded at the start of the survey of the definition of intellectual disability. Even so, they may have had in mind people with milder forms of intellectual disability who may be more visible to the public. But perhaps the relationship between capability and rights is more significant than focusing on the actual percentage respondents of endorsing the capabilities sampled. In that respect, it is noteworthy that a large minority of respondents (39%) gave lower ratings to both capability and rights and a further 17% gave lower capability ratings although they were supportive of rights. This suggests that the public maybe more likely to support the rights of those they perceive to be more capable and like themselves; rather than people with more severe disabilities. Thus, there remains some way to go in order to persuade the majority of Americans that people with intellectual disability are entitled to the same rights as their peers without disabilities, irrespective of their level of impairment or lack of ability. Indeed modern definitions of disability expound the provision of greater levels of support and adaptations are required in order to ensure that the rights of persons with more severe impairments are respected and implemented (Hilberink & Cardol, 2019). The UNCRPD emphasised this need in other articles, such as Article 5: Equality and Discrimation; Article 8: Awareness Raising and Article 12: Equal Recognition before the Law.

The findings from this study suggest some ways in which public opinion around the rights and capabilities of people with intellectual disability can be influenced. The regression analyses demonstrated that people who have had prior personal contact with someone with an intellectual disability and those working in a related service area are also better disposed to their rights and capabilities. Previous research across different marginalized groups has repeatedly confirmed the link between personal contact and more positive attitudes (Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013). In this respect, the move towards people with intellectual disability living in community settings increases the likelihood of greater personal contacts emerging although active steps need to be taken by their supporters to make these happen and especially for persons with more severe disabilities (Howarth et al., 2016).

The engagement that US respondents had with Special Olympics—whether through active involvement or awareness through the media—also impacted on their ratings of Rights and Capabilities. The organization's focus on promoting the abilities of people with intellectual disability in sports coupled with its presence

TABLE 5 Regression analysis summary for variables predicting capability scores

Variables	Beta	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Standarised Coefficients	*t*	Sig.
(Constant)	6.304	5.956	6.652		35.532	0.000
Prior Contact	−0.529	−0.585	−0.473	−0.121	−18.460	0.000
Engagement with Special Olympics	−0.500	−0.592	−0.408	−0.070	−10.633	0.000
Gender	0.402	0.315	0.489	0.057	9.049	0.000
Age Groups	−0.243	−0.299	−0.187	−0.055	−8.480	0.000
US Ethnic Group	−0.366	−0.472	−0.259	−0.043	−6.721	0.000
Employed in related field	−0.165	−0.278	−0.053	−0.018	−2.884	0.004
Volunteers	0.124	0.034	0.214	0.018	2.701	0.007

locally, regionally and nationally across the United States as well as the media coverage its receives, all contribute to projecting the message that people with intellectual disability deserve, and benefit from the same chances as everyone else (Harada et al., 2011).

Females are more supportive of rights than are males and gave higher capability ratings, which is similar to the findings of previous attitudinal studies although the reasons for this are uncertain (Scior, 2011). Conversely, non-white Americans were less supportive of rights and capabilities which echoes societal attitudes across the United States in recent decades (Marsden, 2012). Also, income levels did not have a significant effect on the attitudes expressed in this study which suggests that ethnicity was not confounded by lower socio-economic status. Despite the large sample, the study was under-powered to investigate the differences among the larger ethnic groups of black-American and Hispanics. Moreover, online surveys may discriminate against the recruitment of persons from ethnic minorities. Future research should address the issue of ethnicity and attitudes to intellectual disability with dedicated samples, albeit that the outcomes will have implications more for the treatment of persons with intellectual disability within minority communities than for influencing the national acceptance of the their rights.

The findings from the current study also confirm that younger respondents aged under 55 years were more supportive of rights and more likely to rate people with intellectual disability as capable. Also, university-educated persons were more supportive of rights but gave lower capability ratings. However, the online surveys may not have been as accessible to persons with lower educational achievements and this finding arguably needs replication with a more representative sample in terms of education.

The limitations of this study also offer directions for future research. The low level of variance which the above variables contributed to the regression models suggests that there are many other unexplained influences underpinning American attitudes to people with intellectual disability. Moreover, these may well be influenced by circumstances that are specific to individuals in terms of their personal characteristics, their history and experiences as well as the social and cultural contexts in which they live and opportunities they have to encounter people with intellectual disability. Thus, attitude formation and change may more likely come from targeted, personalized, local initiatives rather than through generic, national campaigns (Fisher & Purcal, 2017).

These data reported here are valid for one point in time, and because of its cross-sectional nature, it can only identify relationships rather than identify causation. Future research should take a longitudinal perspective, as this has been helpful in other countries in charting public perceptions of the rights over a decade (McConkey, 2019). That study also drew contrasts been attitudes to persons with intellectual disability to those with other marginalized groups such as those with physical disabilities and mental health difficulties. Future research should examine attitudes to comparator groups in order to identify commonalities as well as differences, thereby widening the common purpose among marginalized groups in advocating for their rights to be respected and implemented. Studies that examine the impact of interventions aimed at changing public attitudes are scarce and yet this a powerful way of identifying effective change strategies. In the context of advocacy for rights, a particular focus may need to be on the opinions and beliefs of elected representatives and government officials as they are better placed than the general public to implement any necessary laws and policies.

Further insights are needed into public understanding of the practicalities entailed in shifting to a rights-based approach in meeting the needs of people with intellectual disability and building a more equal and inclusive society. Qualitative studies with influential groups such as leaders in health, education and social services could better inform the nature and range of questions posed in future attitudinal surveys (Pelleboer-Gunnink et al., 2017).

That said, Americans in the closing years of this decade seem well disposed to the rights of people with intellectual disability albeit that this is less so with those whom they judge as less capable. This is an encouraging foundation on which national organizations—such as Special Olympics—can build to gain federal ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of Disabled Persons. Then, an even more crucial challenge can be driven forward: ensuring the implementation of these rights within local communities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

RM and PS were commissioned by Special Olympics to analyse the data from the global surveys. ASm, LD and ASh and are employed by Special Olympics Inc. in their Research and Evaluation Division.

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